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ABSTRACT

Over 100 former board of education members from Oregon completed a questionnaire originally prepared by the "American School Board Journal" for the purpose of investigating why school board members leave their positions. This document presents the full results of the Oregon survey and also provides a summary of the findings and an analysis of their implications for school administration. The survey revealed that the most frequently cited reasons behind members' resignations were that being on the board took too much time, working with federal government agencies was too difficult, and the member no longer had children in school. Over 50 percent indicated they'd consider serving again. The members were most satisfied with their contributions to improvements in personnel practices, educational programs, and facilities. Nine of 10 supported the concept of local lay control of public education. Other responses to the questionnaire provided information on the characteristics of the members, their districts, and their campaigns for office. The implications drawn from analysis of the findings consist primarily of specific actions that school boards and school administrators can take to eliminate unnecessary effort on the part of board members and to enhance the board's ability to focus on significant concerns. (PGD)

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OSSC BULLETIN

FORMER MEMBERS TELL...

WHY THEY LEFT THE SCHOOL BOARD

by

Kenneth A. Erickson

and

Barbara Keirnes

Field Training and Service Bureau

University of Oregon

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PREFACE

An article in the February 1978 American School Board Journal was titled "Why School Board Members Quit--And Why They're Sometimes Glad They Did." Gregg Downey, Senior Editor, had every newspaper in the U.S. combed for six weeks for reports of board members' departures. Then he sent each a questionnaire to determine the reasons for their leaving.

The Oregon School Study Council received permission to use the same questionnaire with former Oregon board members. Every school district was asked for the names of former members who had left the school board as of July 1977 or July 1978. The response by former Oregon board members was excellent. One hundred and nineteen persons responded to the inquiry.

The authors have summarized the questionnaire responses in the "Bulletin Digest." Actual questionnaire responses are reported in "Questionnaire Results." The "Implications for School Administration" section analyzes a few of the report's implications for today's board members and school superintendents.

A careful reading of the reasons for leaving school board service can be helpful to prospective board members, current board members and to school administrators.

Carol Williams
Governing Board Chair
Oregon School Study Council

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Bulletin Digest

- Former Oregon school board members ranked the following as the top three "very important reasons" for leaving the school board.

  a. Being a board member takes too much time.

  b. Dealing with federal government agencies is a hassle I can do without.

  c. My children are no longer in school.

- When writing comments on the question, "Why did you leave your school board?" the following were mentioned most frequently.

  a. Was transferred or otherwise moved out of the district.

  b. Felt that I had served long enough.

- When asked to explain the combination of causes which made them decide to leave the school board, the most frequent responses given were:

  a. Declining board authority.

  b. Unionization and negotiations.

  c. State and federal mandates.

- If another opportunity arose to be on the school board, the following would serve again:

  Oregon, 55%

  National, 42%

- Board members stated that their most satisfying accomplishments included:

  a. Improved personnel practices.

b. Improved educational programs.

c. Improved educational facilities.

◉90% of former Oregon board members support the concept of local lay control of public education.

◉Most board members contemplated leaving their position during their last year of service. 67% of Oregon board members completed their term while 75% nationally completed their term before departing.

◉90% of the announced reasons for leaving the school board in Oregon were true, while 88% were true nationally.

◉66% of Oregon board members encouraged a successor to fill their post, but only 50% did so nationally.

◉The most common advice which former Oregon board members would give someone contemplating school board service for the first time included:

a. Listen carefully.

b. Be open-minded.

c. Don't have an axe to grind.

d. Be committed.

◉28 of Oregon's 36 counties were represented in these responses.

◉The school district size most often represented by former Oregon board members was 1,000-2,490 students.

◉25% of Oregon's former school board members were women; 32% nationally were women.

◉More Oregon board members were in the 36-40 age category than in any other five-year range. 75% fell in the 36-55 year age range. Oregon's youngest board member was 28, while the youngest nationally was 32. Oregon's oldest board member was 79; nationally, the oldest was 71.

◉Most board members (57%) served from 1-5 years on Oregon school boards. The average length of total board service in Oregon was 6 years; nationally, it was 7.7 years.

◉65% of Oregon ex-board members first got on the board by means of a regular election; 29% were appointed to fill a vacancy.

◉Vocationally, 26% of Oregon's ex-board members are local businessmen; 28% nationally. 21% of Oregon's ex-board members are farmer-ranchers; 17% is the national figure. 17% of Oregon's board members are housewives; 10% nationally.

◉4 years was the duration of term of office for 85% of Oregon's ex-board members. 50% of those responding nationally had terms of three years.

◉52% of Oregon ex-board members described their districts as predominantly rural; 27% nationally. 38% described their districts as small towns; 13% nationally. 13% in Oregon described their districts as suburban; 50% nationally.

◉69% of Oregon former board members estimated they spent from $0-15 out-of-pocket expense for running for the school board.

◉41% of Oregon's former school board members estimated that they gave 21-50 hours of service a month to various school board activities.

◉79% of former school board members in Oregon indicated they received the Quarterly Report of the Oregon School Study Council.

Questionnaire Results

1a. Why did you leave the school board?

Former Oregon school board members were asked to indicate whether each of the alternatives given below was a very important reason, one of several reasons, or unrelated to an individual's decision to leave the school board. The reasons are listed in rank order of importance for individuals who left the school board.

A very important reason:	One of several reasons:	
1	1	Being a board member takes too much time.
2	10	Dealing with federal government agencies is a hassle I can do without.
3	7	My children are no longer in school.
4	6	Dealing with state government agencies is a hassle I can do without.
5	12	The board was always dealing in trivia.
6	--	I was defeated in my bid for reelection.
6	20	Dealing with my superintendent is a hassle I can do without.
6	18	Being a board member was hurting my health.
9	4	I had accomplished all I could on the board.
9	7	Dealing with citizen committees is a hassle I can do without.

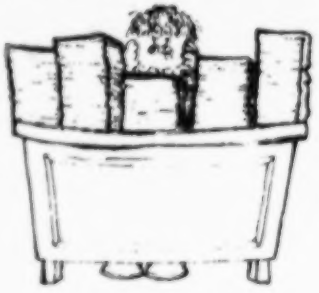
A very important reason:	One of several reasons:	
11	14	Dealing with the local news media is a hassle I can do without.
11	5	My spouse recommended I quit.
11	2	Being a board member was hurting my family life.
14	16	Being a board member was hurting my business.
14	3	Dealing with teacher organizations is a hassle I can do without.
14	7	Dealing with local officials is a hassle I can do without.
14	14	I was tired of being outvoted on every issue.
14	—	I was appointed to another public office.
19	—	I wanted to run for another public office.
19	13	I found I disliked being a board member.
19	10	I just got bored with it all.
19	16	Dealing with my colleagues on the board is a hassle I can do without.
19	18	Being a board member doesn't pay well enough.

1b. Additional reasons why you left the school board.

Forty former board members volunteerd comments to this question. The most frequent response dealt with having moved out of the district. The second reason comlented on most frequently was they felt they had served long enough. Other comments included the following:

Unfortunately, there was just not enough time for me to do as much as I wanted to do.

Reading demands — We were inundated with printed material of little use to anyone, except to flatter the egos of the authors.



"All things to all people" — Board members spent too much time on trivia because they are afraid to speak their own mind--afraid to be wrong--afraid of special interest and very vocal groups. Boards are losing their power part by default, part by government money (Title programs) and strings. Boards want to be <u>all</u> things to <u>all</u> people.

Recall — Two recall elections were all I wanted to go through.

<u>1c. Please...explain the combination of causes which made you decide to leave the school board</u>.

Representative replies include the following:

"Burnt out" — After serving approximately six years on the school board, I desired a rest for a few years. I was burnt out on the school board meetings and committees. My children have not yet started school, but I feel that when they begin, I will undoubtedly run for a school board position.

Children no longer in school — My children are all out of school. I felt I had been on the board too long (fifteen years) and the board needed new blood.

My second child had only one year of school left and my term would have been for another four years. My philsophy had been that a board member's judgement should be tempered by having a child in school, and I could already find myself asking, "Would you vote this way if Jim were going to be in school for another year?"

My youngest child quit school, and I felt "embarrassed" to keep talking about "our good school system" when I couldn't keep my own in school.

Our two children are now out of the local schools. My interests go with our children. As a board member, I felt it my duty to be on time and in attendance at all meetings. Being a "member" is such a tremendous experience, that it should be shared with other parents.

Academics vs dollars

Lack of time given to decisions based upon academic considerations as opposed to the majority which are based on financial considerations.

Declining board authority

It is somewhat discouraging to try to accomplish much when new laws and rules handed down from higher levels (county, state, and federal) undercut the board's authority.

Board members are very limited in their ability to change the course of events in a school district.

A school board has no control--you can pay the power bill and ask the teacher the time of day. All the rest is dictated by someone in Salem or Washington. Most boards are given the benefit and respect for having no sense.

To see how much control the federal and state government has over our schools scares the hell out of me.

I believe school boards, administrators and office help are spending far too much time trying to keep up with the federal government's never-ending regulations and paperwork.

State and federal mandates

School district operation has become extremely complex with employee negotiations, mandates from the state and federal level, pressures from citizen groups (all legitimate board functions) that I sometimes feel that providing guidance to one's local district as an educational institution, gets lost in the shuffle.

Athletics

Board members support too much athletics with the excuse of "keeping kids in school."

Unionization and negotiations

The politics in power of the OEA is distressing to me as is the government interference in education.

The attitude of many teachers towards their jobs has become "try to make me do anything but the minimum" because of tenure. Our children are suffering and there isn't much a board member can do to improve the situation.

The collective bargaining process...takes the fun out of serving.

Amount of time required outside of regular meetings with teacher negotiations and classified negotiations.

I have worked closely with teachers for years and have always taught my children to respect teachers for their efforts and their responsibilities. I found the adversary relationship between teachers and administration and board to be more than distasteful. Destructive is a better word to express the effect of it.

As our children progressed through the grades, I always maintained a warm and friendly relationship with their teachers and the school. I felt and still do feel a lot of admiration and respect for a dedicated teacher. However, I feel a teacher organization has hurt the relationship (in most cases) between teachers, school boards, and parents. The children are the losers. Teacher strikes surely hurt the prestige of the teaching profession. I don't know what the answers are, but it seems to me, the desire to progress and always be changing we have regressed.

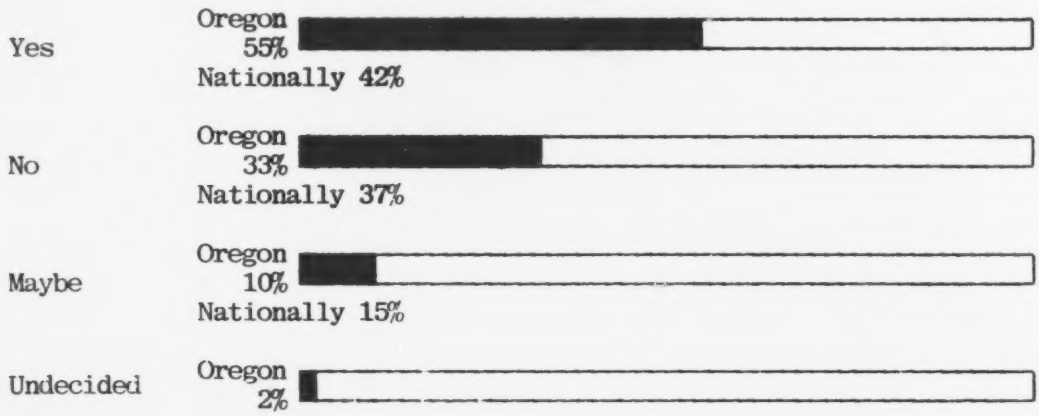
Not indispensable

You should not regard yourself as indispensable. I feel twelve years is long enough for service in any office. I retired for that reason.

I felt that these goals and expectations that I had set for myself with the schools were not being met. With much thought on how the school district should function for the betterment of the students--faculty--and community, I felt that someone should be appointed in my place. I dearly love this district and I was not just copping out. I just believe that there was need for a change.

Thankless job	You must satisfy all these people that know nothing about running a school. In one phrase I can explain it all: "one thankless job."
Time for change	I wanted to dedicate more time to the family and the church and other things I had neglected. I had served a total of twelve years and was approaching 80, so my time was up. I do not believe our form of government can be truly representative if our elected officials become entrenched. They become a part of the problem instead of problem solvers. We need fresh, frequent, representative input if we are to prevent our educational system from becoming atrophied. What better place to start than with me?

2. If the opportunity arose, would you serve on the school board again?



3. What do you regard as your most satisfying accomplishment(s) during your service on the board?

Personnel Relationships

Working for and with youth. Self improvement and greater awareness as I was part of a growing, reorganized district. Instrumental in selecting a new superintendent who is excellent.

Making sure we hired good teachers.

Hired a "go-getting" superintendent who made some much needed, overdue changes in fiscal procedures and educational processes.

I helped to rid the community of some teachers who were not doing their job. I opened better relations between public and board and encouraged students to approach the board under proper procedures so their needs could be heard.

Educational Program

Primarily supporting quality education in the district. The board member doesn't cause this to happen--he or she helps to create an atmosphere for this to happen.

Seeing an improvement in academic achievement for most of the young people in the district.

Providing very high level of education through quality teachers and superintendent.

Started Saturday school as an alternative to expelling those who cut classes; increased emphasis on school discipline; being a spokesman for improved teaching for the slow learner; strengthened teacher evaluations; and aided in the removal of a few incompetents.

Articulating issues I felt important; greater concentration on reading, computation skills, writing, speaking programs; accountability of teachers and administrators.

Working for public kindergarten in our district.

Providing quality education in a low-income district.

Continuation of a well-planned curriculum with new emphasis placed on curriculum enrichment and special education programs for those kids with special difficulties and those who are gifted.

School Buildings

The building of a grade school.

Improvement of facilities.

Dealing with the building program. The first year we had 90 pupils, and six years later, there were 420.

Balancing Role

Providing a moderating effect on our board between the competetive elements of the educational enterprise and the community; two terms as chairman without losing my cool.

Keeping the board confined to the policy area and out of the operational area.

Improved the relationship between the citizens and the schools, teachers, administration and board.

I was instrumental in getting the school board and the administration to understand that we didn't have to go along with everything the state and federal government tried to push on us and that everything the state and federal government and state school board said was not necessarily true. I do believe the only way schools are going to make it, is if they come clean and be straight forward and truthful with the general public.

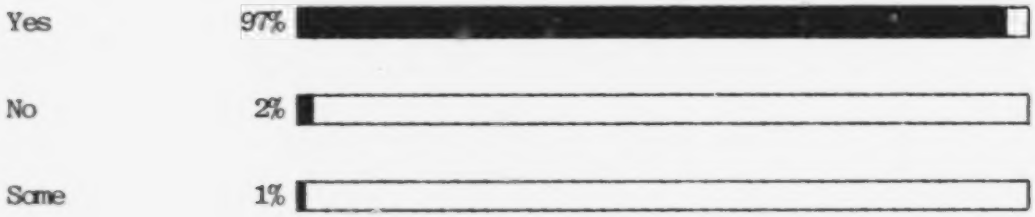
Encouraged discussion as opposed to "yessing."

Encouraging fellow board members to speak out on their thoughts on issues at board meetings--not to do it privately where it does no good!

My ability to give a sense of balance to some awkward situations concerning immature mothers requesting impossible things.

As board chairman, being able to hold the diverse elements of the community behind the school community and the board, being able to work compatibly with the different board and administration personalities, and keep the necessary push to have a good system.

4. Do you support the concept of local lay control of public education?



5. How long before you left the board did you contemplate leaving?

I didn't make up my mind for sure until two months prior to the election. I published my decision in the district paper so that I would not have second thoughts, or succumb to the well-meaning advice of friends or colleagues.

Resigned in a moment of complete frustration.

I only planned to spend one full term on the board.

I accepted the job and wouldn't resign.

6. Did you complete your term before departing?

Yes — Oregon 67% — Nationally 75%

No — Oregon 33% — Nationally 25%

Felt strong responsibility to complete my term.

The superintendent asked me to stay.

I have a strong sense of completing what I obligated myself to do.

Committed for a full term.

I felt it my duty since being elected by the people to serve.

I refused to be a quitter.

7. Was the announced reason for your departure the true reason?

Yes — Oregon 90% — Nationally 88%

No — Oregon 9% — Nationally 12%

Partially — Oregon 1%

If no, why not?

Had no desire to hurt feelings, so did not say that working with the present administration was impossible for me.

The true reason would only have stirred the community to further unease.

I felt it would be difficult to get district levies passed if the electorate was informed about the situation to which I objected.

8. Did you encourage a successor to fill your post?

Yes — Oregon 66% — Nationally 50%

No — Oregon 34% — Nationally 50%

I encouraged a number of successors, but explained what they would be in for. If they wanted their school straightened out, this was the way they could have a hand in it.

He (my successor) had given me a lot of static while in office. The monkey is now on his back, because there is a new group of immature mommies to deal with.

Encouraged several to run and talked with them regarding the necessary commitment.

I did announce my decision not to run in our district periodical, and invited interested patrons to enter the race.

Recommended a person to the board who I felt shared my ideals and goals.

I felt it was desirable to have a female member on the board.

Good people need to be encouraged today. The poor ones run for any and every job.

9. What advice would you offer someone who is contemplating school board service for the first time?

Open minded	Go into the position with an open mind. Do not make a personal decision without listening to all sides of the situation. Be able to compromise a little bit. If you feel your position on a certain subject is the right one, fight tooth and nail.
	You represent the board only when it is in official session. Vote on the facts only.
	Don't push your own ideas into effect. They may not all be that good.
	Remember you are working for all the patrons of your district.
Listen	Listen carefully to all problems, and seek advice from veteran board members before making decisions.
	Listen to all sides of an issue before rendering a comment, regardless of casual or formal situation.
	Listen; seek and use data; remain independent; measure decisions with regard to the impact on kids.

Plan on being a listener the first year. Attend all sessions. Attend the state and the national meetings if possible. Remember the student comes first.

Prepare yourself

Attend board meetings for at least six months before running. Background information is vital after the election.

Listen and learn before getting on a soap box.

Develop a thick skin. Don't be over ambitious. Do your homework.

No axe to grind

Serve to help, not because you have an axe to grind.

Be sure you are interested in education and youth, rather than vindictiveness or causes.

If you want to truly serve your community, this is a good place to do so. If you have a "bone to pick," you shouldn't consider it. Board members need to be objective people.

Know time involvement

Look at it hard; figure what it's going to cost you in time. If you can spare it, get prepared for a tough frustrating job, with little or no thanks for your effort.

Only God, family, and business should come before your school board duties--it is a demanding and time-consuming position--also fun and challenging. The person who doesn't get around to doing his homework, doesn't belong there.

Tolerance

Be ready to tolerate a lot of damn fools who have no ideas about running a business, employee relations, or the like.

Learn to listen; learn to speak carefully.

Detachment

Don't let the politics of the district become of such concern as to effect your thinking and health.

Be able to deal with conflicting opinions in an inpersonal manner.

Frustration — Be prepared for loss of friends, vilification and frustration.

First, don't bother unless you are looking for a thankless job, filled with frustration or are an incurable optimist looking for a public place to serve.

Be prepared to be misunderstood and have your motives and integrity attacked.

Commitment — Demand of yourself one hundred percent--weigh all decisions with an open mind--try not to be emotional. Be prepared--study--do your homework. 1) Take a long look at a minimum of an eight-year commitment. 2) Write 1,000 times: "I shall be brave." 3) Understand the meaning of brave.

Don't serve on the school board if you haven't the true interest of the school district. Too many people like the title, but do not attend meetings or take full responsibility as an individual for their decisions. Do not be a rubber stamp--find out the facts for yourself!

Learn to say no. Too many members are sheep.

The first year you are like a first grader; but hang in there baby. Things will get a little better later.

Remember that your duty is two-fold--to the students and to the taxpayers. You should give the students the best education possible for the most reasonable amount of tax possible.

Be honest with yourself. Realize that most teachers are good people. Let your superintendent run the school under good guidelines. Don't be afraid to face Joe Public.

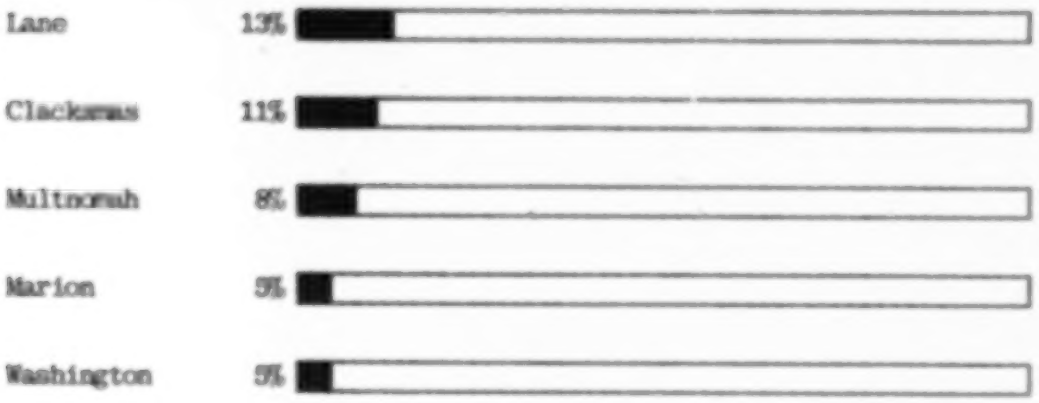
Vote as you see the issue, even if not popular.

Satisfaction — Expect to give much time and thought to school matters. It is a big job, but very worth while.

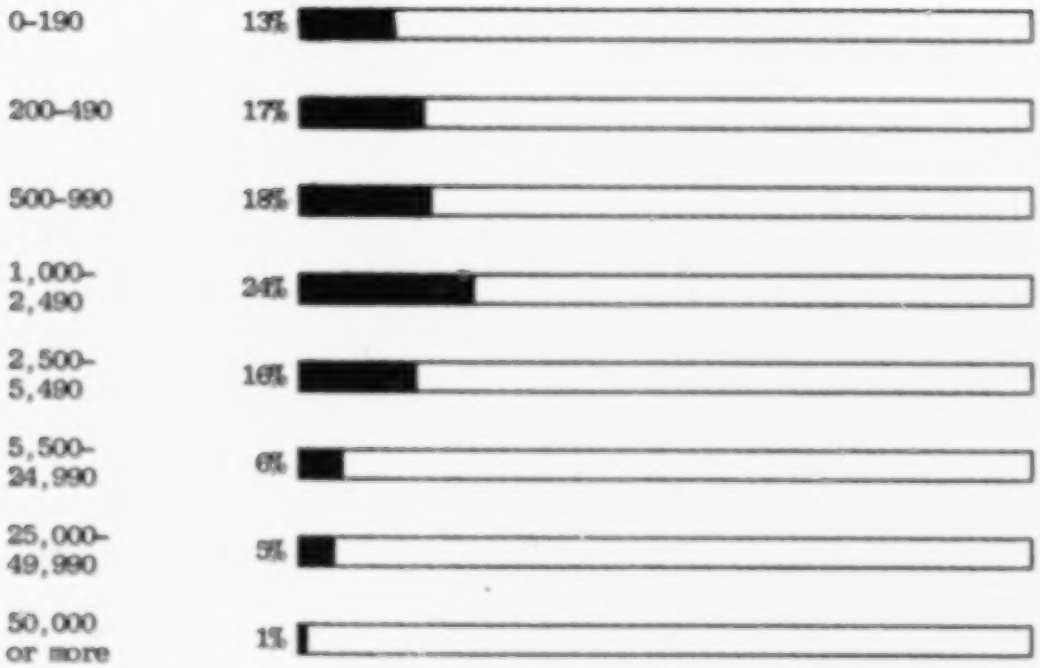
I think this is the best way for a person to have a real effect on the education and development of the youth of the community.

10. In which county is your school district?

Twenty-eight of Oregon's thirty-six counties were represented in the responses. Forty-two percent (42%) of all responses came from:



11. How many students in your school district?



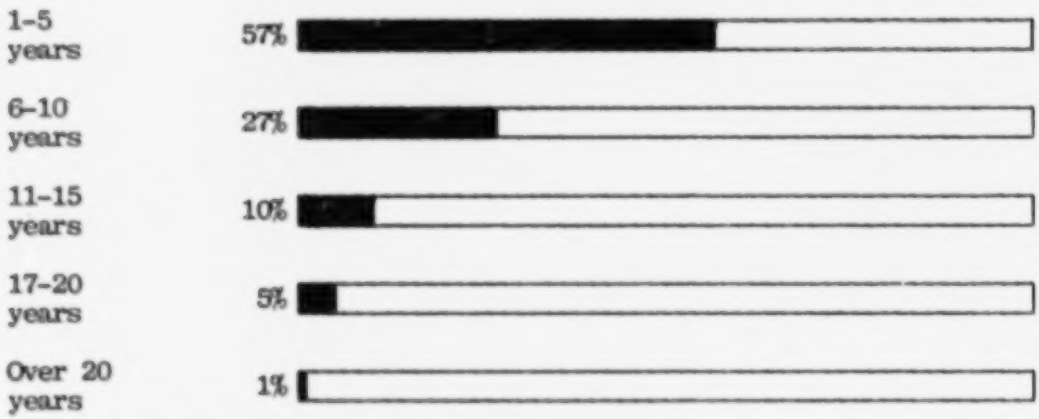
The national range of students in a school district is 200 to 500,000 students. The largest percentage (17%) of ex-board members nationally came from districts with a range of 1,000 to 1,999 students.

12. Are you male or female?

13. What is your age?

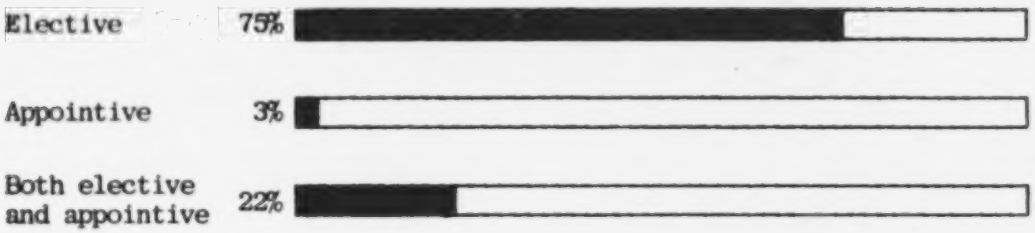
More Oregon board members fell in the 36-40 age category (22%) than in any other five-year range. Seventy-five percent (75%) of Oregon former board members were in the 36-55 year age range. The youngest board member was 28, and the oldest 79 years of age. Nationally, the male respondent average age was 50; the female respondent average age was 44; and the overall average age was 47. The youngest board member surveyed nationally was 32, and the oldest 71 years of age.

14. How many years did you serve on the school board?

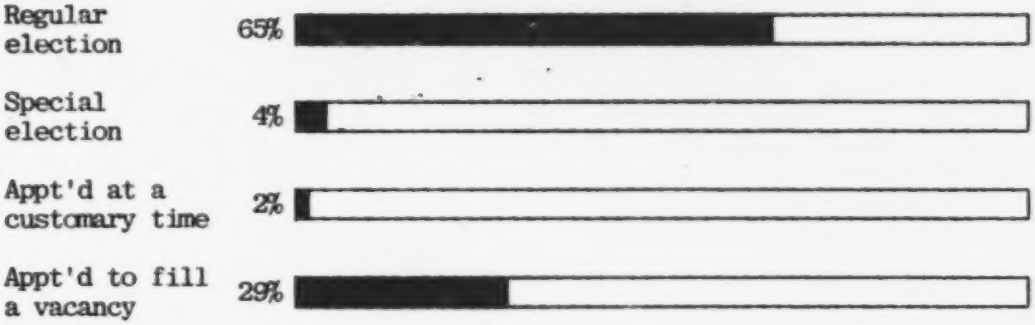


In Oregon, the ex-board member average length of service was six years (one served 29 years). Nationally, the average length of service was 7.7 years.

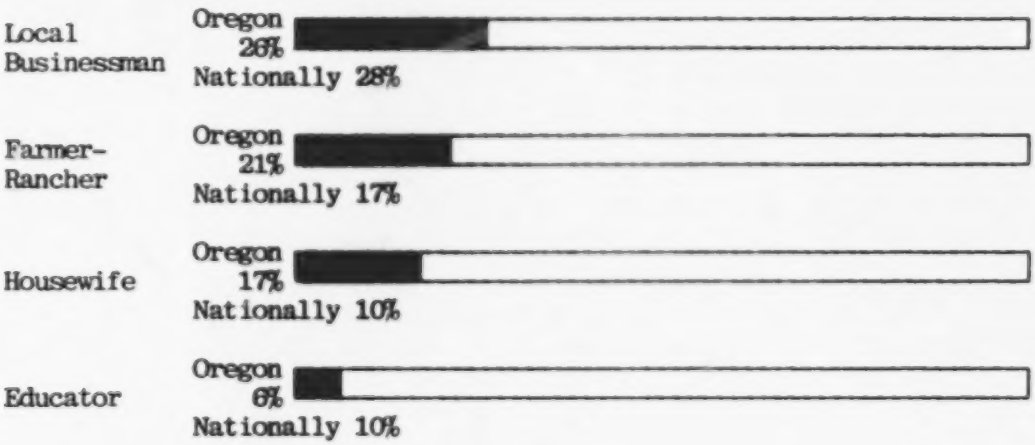
15. What type of a term did you serve?

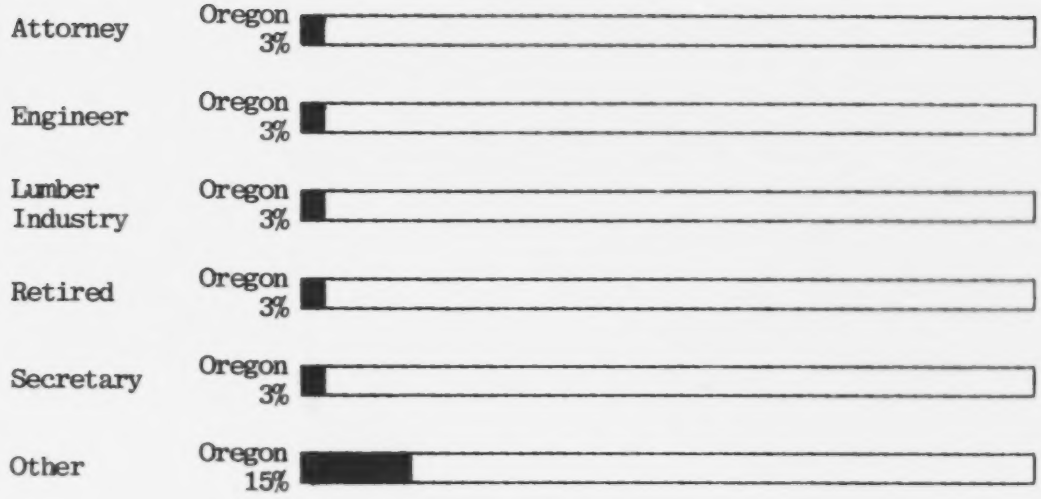


16. How did you get on the board the first year of service?

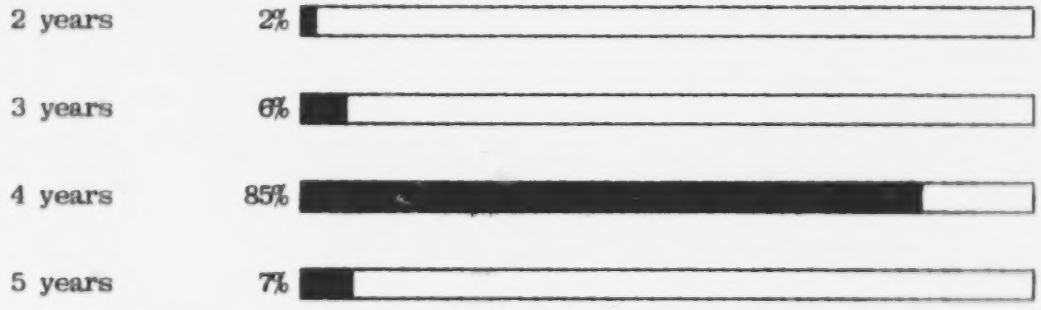


17. Professionally, do you think of yourself primarily as:



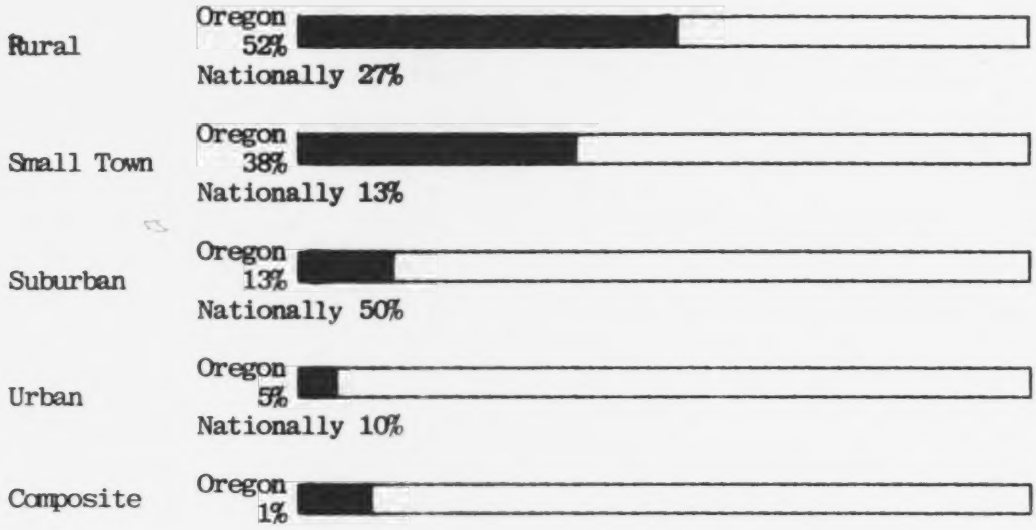


18. What is the duration of one normal term of office on your school board?

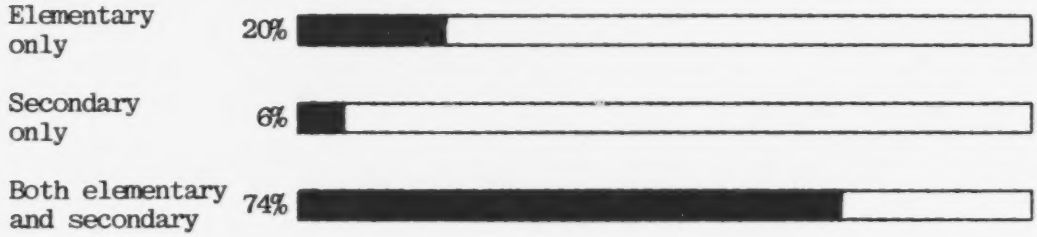


The national term of office ranged from 3-10 years with 50% responding their boards have three-year terms.

19. Would you describe your school district as predominantly:

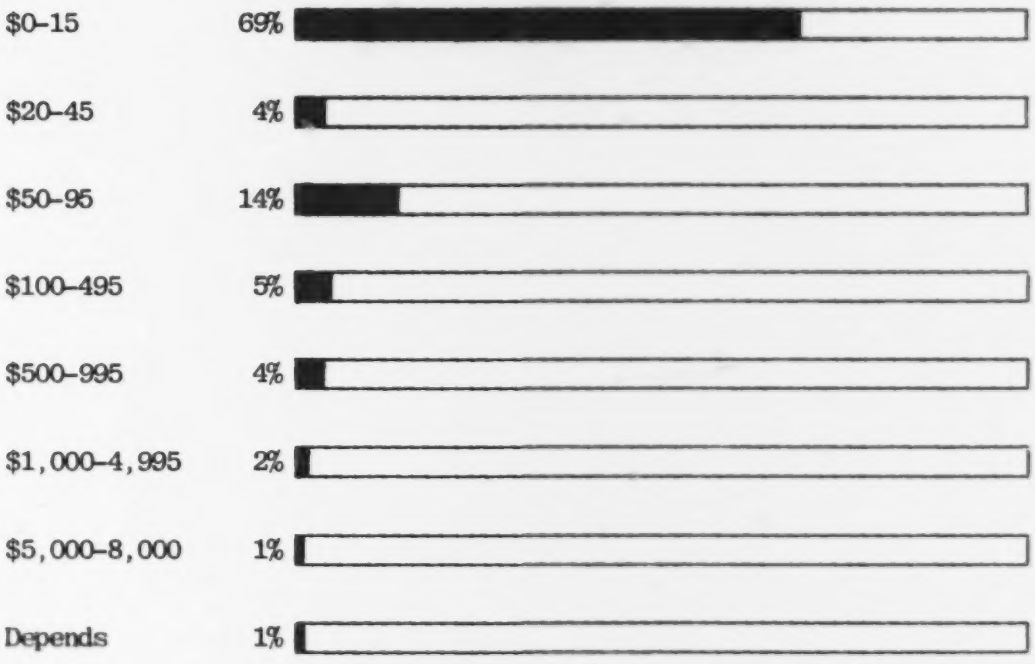


20. Is your school district:

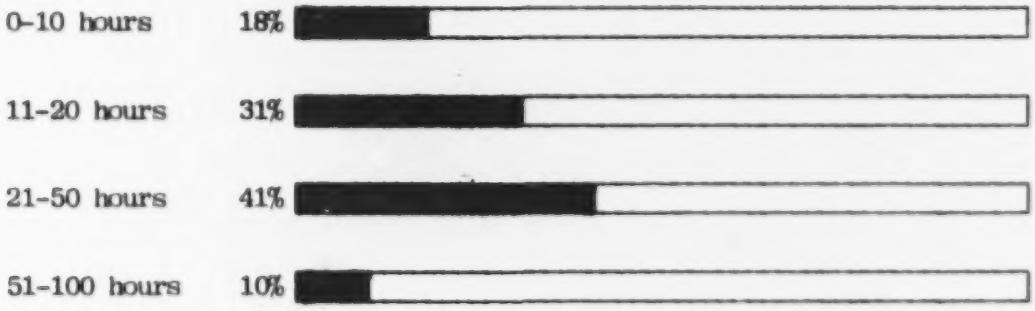


21. What was your total pay, if any (salary, honoraria), for school board service during the last year you served?

22. What would you estimate as the out-of-pocket expense of running for school board office in your district today?



23. On the average, how many hours per month do you estimate you gave to school board service, including meetings, reading, telephone calls, visiting schools, etcetera?



24. As a school board member, did you receive the *Quarterly Report* of the Oregon School Study Council?

Yes	79%	
No	21%	

Thought-provoking--comments from it invariably generated good discussion.

It was the best source of objective and useful information available.

Very informative.

And I read it!

Unknown.

Always something of value for myself in every issue.

Don't remember it.

One of the better journals--useful, pragmatic.

I found it very informative.

Truthfully, I do not remember.

Very helpful.

It is interesting and a help to board members.

25. Additional comments you may wish to volunteer.

I was very sorry for having resigned my position. Would definitely like to run again.

My years on the school board were very rewarding years in personal satisfaction of growth in district and better education for the student.

From my experience, you only have the people who elected you to please, you don't have to please the superintendent, other school board members, or administration. It's all a political ball game. I don't know who's going to win. I hope it's the kids.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time on the school board, and after a year, I still miss being involved.

I went into the school board with concerns about children's education. I left with the same concerns.

It was a very rewarding experience to be on the board. I think my time was well spent and I feel I got a lot done for our schools. Being on the school board opened up many new areas for me. I feel that while it took a great deal of my time, I got a great benefit from the experience. It was an area where I felt that my time was well spent and it was a satisfying experience to feel that in a small way I was helping to educate our young people.

Enjoyed my service--learned a great deal and experienced personal growth. Most important, I think new people should keep moving through the board--it's bad to have the same people on for a long time!

I felt that serving a school district is a worthwhile experience. It was very time-demanding, but a person gets much more personal satisfaction as a reward than the time he invests.

There is a complete cut off when your term ends. No more contact from the district or board--you very quickly become out of touch. If you miss a newspaper article, you know nothing about what is going on. You soon forget when meetings are held. And in 18 months or less I have yet to be inspired to go to a meeting. That will still take time.

People say it is a thankless job--maybe so, but there is so much satisfaction in doing the best you can and the great variety of situations involved. It is one of the happiest things I ever did.

Implications for School Administration

◉On longer reports to the school board, place a one-page fact sheet summarizing its content on top of the report. Refer to pages in the report where more information on specific items may be found.

◉When assembling background information on agenda items, be certain that all information is essential. Make reference to additional information that is available on request from the superintendent's office.

◉School boards can't be all things to all people in a limited span of time. Boards should choose several specific targets for each school year. For example, a board may decide to spend several entire meetings on instructional matters according to a time schedule adopted at the first of the school year. Whenever a goal is met the board should celebrate its success.

◉Dedicate a minimum of one day a year to a work session (preferably away from the district office) when targets for the coming year are identified and processes of working together can be discussed and adopted.

◉A school board should identify in advance those areas where it wishes the superintendent to bring his or her written recommendations. This focuses discussion on a preplanned proposal that can be more expeditiously discussed, modified and dispatched.

◉Utilize the consent agenda process. The chair reads quickly through all recommendations asking whether anyone on the board or in the audience wishes to speak to a particular item. All items on which no one has any questions may then be passed with just one motion.

◉Delineate clearly between the duties and responsibilities of the school board and the duties and responsibilities of the school superintendent. Avoid infringing on each other's turf.

●Use a transparency and overhead projector to display motions made during meetings so all board members and participants will have the same proposal in mind during the discussion of and action on the motion.

●Whenever new board members are installed, set aside time to review the parliamentary procedures previously adopted by the board.

●Recognize that conflict is inevitable and natural. Seek training in listening skills, in handling complaints, and in conflict resolution skills.

●The responsibilities and authority of the chairman to conduct board meetings with firmness and control should be clearly understood by the chairman as well as by all board members. Being the board chairperson is a difficult task. It may be advisable to seek assistance in improving skills of communication and effective meeting procedures.

●During board meetings all questions and comments from the floor should be directed to the chair. Board meetings should not become public arenas for undisciplined debate. The chair should decide whether to say or do anything about comments from the floor, whether the matter should be taken under advisement, whether it should be referred to the superintendent for later report or referred now to a specific board member for comment.

●Unnecessary conflicts concerning statements supposedly made at board meetings can be avoided if the minutes are simplified to consist of:

a. A section devoted to a listing of official board actions.

b. A section devoted to board requests for administrative actions, reports or matters requiring subsequent follow-up.

c. A section noting issues discussed but avoiding the association of specific comments with any individuals.

◉Keep former board members on the mailing list for copies of agendas, minutes and general district publications for at least one year after their term expires.

OREGON SCHOOL STUDY COUNCIL
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